DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 422 574 CS 216 453

AUTHOR Renker, F. W.
TITLE Authority and Imagined Truth: Notes on Teaching Creative Nonfiction.
PUB DATE 1998-04-00
NOTE 5p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (49th, Chicago, IL, April 1-4, 1998).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; *Creative Writing; Higher Education; *Nonfiction; Poetry; *Student Journals; Writing Improvement; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Authority; Delta College MI

ABSTRACT

An instructor who teaches composition, poetry, and creative nonfiction at Delta Community College in central Michigan language makes connections and helps people imagine their way fully into subjects. People have a deep, if unconscious and unfocused, need to discover and tell the truth. For one semester his students act like writers. They keep journals; look at the world and their own interior life in an observant, writerly way; read good writing; are as objective as possible about their drafts; and welcome feedback. Classroom and conference talk often returns to the central theme of truth-telling. The best student writers gravitate to imaginative ways of saying what needs to be said. Eventually good student writers develop the will and the stamina to revise, eventually writing with more "author"-ity. (CR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 422 574

F.W. "Skip" Renker
608 Hillcrest
Midland, MI 48640

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

F. Renker

Authority and Imagined Truth: Notes on Teaching Creative Nonfiction

I teach composition, poetry, and creative nonfiction at Delta Community College in central Michigan. As writers, my students and I have a lot in common, beginning with a world of language that "gives and gives," as William Stafford says in his essay called "Writing." Generating words, for us, is almost as natural as breathing; we've spent our lifetimes, my students and I, using words to move back and forth between experience and reflection. Our language makes connections, helps us imagine our way fully into our subjects, and we have a deep, if unconscious and unfocused, need to discover and tell the truth.

We talk about much of this in the first few class periods. We also discuss what we don't, as yet, have in common; few of my students have developed, as I have to some degree, the habits and attitudes of a working writer. For one semester, I recommend that they act like writers. Among other things, I ask them to keep a journal; look at the world and their own interior life in an observant, writerly way; read good writing; be as objective as possible about their drafts; welcome feedback.

As my students produce narratives, memoirs, poems, reading responses, and research-based pieces, our classroom and conference talk often returns to the central theme of truth-telling. We're

CS 216453

surrounded by a culture that promotes lies, evasions, distortions, creating a media-generated miasma that pervades minds and souls. Writing gives us an opportunity to cut through, clarify, uncover, discover. Writing frees us to attempt truth--maybe not the truth, but our authentic response to experience. Most student writers who persist find a basic need they hadn't fully recognized--truth hunger.

Not that writing must always be an angst-ridden, depth-dredging trial--Stafford, by contrast, called it "one of the great, free human activities." One of my students, Stephanie Heit, a tall, rangy young woman, a dancer and a French major, writes in her course self-evaluation, "Life is a first draft you can never revise. Unlike writing, where you can go back and fill in the rough spots, cut a little, find the perfect word...It's nice to tell a word it doesn't belong and scratch it out--no hard feelings."

Stephanie recognizes the freedom that writing allows, and she often writes pieces that embody what I'm calling "imagined truth." She knows that most creative nonfiction weds the power of imagination with hunger for authenticity. "The empty page," she says, contains "Endless possibilities...I get to turn nothing into something, negating every rule I learned in 12th grade physics." Among other subjects, she writes about the thrill of driving too fast, an eclipse of the moon, and walks across her lawn to the mailbox, the highlight of her days during a relentless depression. She, like other good nonfiction writers, taps all her imaginative resources. She's pragmatic. She's ready to use whatever literary

devices come to mind for her purposes--dialogue, characterization, setting, conscious pacing. The kernel, the essence of the truth, its spirit more than its letter--this is what she's after. Her particular spirit of truth "bloweth where it listeth," and if imaginative, even non-logical, non-linear, associative approaches are at hand, it uses them without compunction.

My best student writers, sometimes with a slight teacherly nudge, gravitate to imaginative ways of saying what needs to be said. Margaret Goka, a nurse, writes about a near-comatose, hospital-bound woman in her early 20's, Lou Ann, who is dying of cancer. Margaret begins the piece "Only the eyes had movement... Chestnut brown with flecks of reflected light, moving momentarily to one side, then switching to the other, and finally focusing on the square tiled ceiling." Her piece is unified by these haunting eyes, which unexpectedly look right into Margaret's moments before the young woman dies. Another student, Melissa Deevers, writes "The alcoholic me was a very different person from the real me. Where I was awkward and self-conscious, she was graceful and confident." Melissa's seven-page piece uses the two selves idea to explore her identity and her need. The devices such people as Margaret, Melissa, Annie Dillard, or Scott Russell Sanders employ are not so much "literary" as necessary; they're often the only means by which the spirit of truth can have its way with these writers.

However, truth rarely alights on the unprepared. In an essay called "Why Memoir Now?", Vivian Gornick says "Truth...is achieved when the reader comes to believe that the writer is working hard to

engage with the experience at hand." This work ethic gradually permeates good student writers; they develop the will and the stamina to revise. Eventually they write with more "author"-ity. Some writers shy away from the word "author," perhaps because it conjures up a tweed-jacketed, pipe-smoking fellow with an abstracted air. But the first definition in my unabridged Webster's says an author is "one who produces, creates, or brings into being." This authoring can feel, to students, both awesome and humbling. The world has given them words to shape into something with meaning. This something that never existed before on any page is a sign of growing authority over ideas, feelings, their own lives; when the piece works, it wakes others up, moves them, makes them think. Such students of writing become authors. They bring something new into being; they use their imaginations to tell the truth.